

ON ADVERTISING

Sut Jhally v. James Twitchell

Sut Jhally and James Twitchell consider advertising to be the central meaning-maker in our culture, the key storyteller; both concern themselves not with what advertising is supposed to do--sell stuff--but what it does while doing it; for them, whether advertising sells goods or not is largely beside the point. Both argue that advertising works as a form of religion, that it has even supplanted religion as the key institution of our time. And yet Jhally and Twitchell come to opposite conclusions about what all this means. Jhally says advertising is destroying society; Twitchell says it's holding it together.

I asked Sut and James (he goes by Jim, actually) to participate in a sort of laissez-faire debate, mailed them a list of questions, and, arranged a three-way conference call.

Sut Jhally is a professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst where he founded the Media Education Foundation. Author of Codes of Advertising, Dreamworlds I & II, and Advertising and the End of the World (the latter two are videos), Marxist, Critic, Straight Man, he's a passionate and incredibly articulate speaker. One gets the idea from talking to him that Jhally studies advertising not because it's hip but important.

James Twitchell teaches at the University of Florida and is author of Adcult, Carnival Culture, and this summer's Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism (Columbia). Prolific as all get out, a new book, Twenty Ads That Shook The World, is already in the pipeline for next year, and he's currently working on another about the concept of luxury. Unlike Jhally, Twitchell writes for the lay reader. He's witty, sharp, and prone to pithy aphorisms--not unlike an ad man. As a vocal defender of advertising, he's far too likable. One gets the idea from talking to him that Twitchell studies advertising not only because it's important but also because it's fun.

As far as I'm concerned, the greatest thing Sut Jhally and James Twitchell have in common is that they both scare me (or, rather, the thought of having to debate them does).

—Carrie McLaren (editor Stay Free magazine)

Stay Free!: What's your agenda? What are you trying to accomplish?

JHALLY: As a social scientist, I am interested in the question of determination--what structures the world and how we live in it. To understand the modern world requires some perspective on advertising. For me, the function of knowledge is to provide people with tools to see the world in different ways and to be able to act and change the world. I work with Marx's aphorism:

philosophers help us understand the world, but the point is to change it. If that's not the function of universities, I don't know why we exist. If it's simply to reproduce knowledge about the world or train people for jobs, why bother?

TWITCHELL: I agree with most of that. Advertising is the lingua franca by which we communicate our needs and desires and wants. Not to take it seriously is not to do our job. I was intrigued by advertising first as a scholar of language and literature. I was amazed by how little my students knew about literature compared to advertising. Almost in a flash, I realized I was neglecting this great body of material while the material I was teaching seemed, to them, unimportant. I jumped tracks then and moved from high culture to commercial culture. These are tracks, incidentally, not just in American culture but in world culture as well. We are now living in a world informed by language about things. It's not the world that I knew and studied--the world about thoughts and feelings in terms of literature--or the world that preceded that one, which was a world about language and religion.

JHALLY: So do you use advertising as a way of doing literary analysis?

TWITCHELL: I look at it like this: We've turned our noses up at the material world and pretended it was not really important. Clearly, for most people, most of the time, the material is the world. They live in terms of mass-produced objects. How we understand those objects is, to a great degree, what commercial interests decide to say about them. So I'm not just looking at linguistic aspects. I'm interested in why the material world has

been so overlooked. Why has it been so denigrated? Why are we convinced that happiness can't come from it? Why do those of us in our fifties warn the generation behind us to stay away from this stuff?

JHALLY: The material world was for many years ignored, but not by Marxists. In fact, Marx starts off *Capital* with an analysis of the material world. He says capitalism has transformed the material world, and, in that sense, it's a revolutionary society. Marx thought that capitalism has a lot of very literary and progressive things because it blew away the repression of feudalism. The left has often been criticized for not looking at the material world, but they focus almost entirely on production. What they've really left out is culture. They've regarded it as secondary and so Western Marxism has tried to re-address that imbalance. The reason I am interested in advertising, coming out of that tradition, is that advertising links those two things together. It allows us to speak about both the material world and the world of symbolism and culture.

Jim, you were saying that we are always preaching that happiness doesn't come from things and we should be less moralistic. My view is driven by political factors, not moral ones. I think we should ask empirical questions. Does happiness come from things? Has more happiness given us more things? If it has, what are the costs of that? The evidence is that material things do not deliver the type of happiness that the system says they should deliver.

TWITCHELL: Is there a system that does deliver more happiness? If so, why hasn't it elbowed its way through and pushed this system aside?

JHALLY: The other systems don't exist. I certainly couldn't point to anything based on what is called the Marxian tradition. The Soviet Union was a dungeon. China is not quite the same dungeon but . . . a better system lies in the future. The whole point of doing this type of analysis is to imagine what a system would look like that catered to human needs. That's why I look at advertising. What does advertising stress as a system? What are the values? Advertising doesn't say happiness comes only from things. It says you can get friendship through things. You can get family life through things. Things are used as a medium. Advertisers are really smart. They've realized since the 1920s that things don't make people happy, that what drives people is a social life.

TWITCHELL: In that case, maybe they are doing what most people want, loading value into things. You may not like the amount of money they make or you may think the process is environmentally wicked, but aren't they delivering what people want and need?

JHALLY: No! Advertisers are delivering images of what people say they want connected to the things advertisers sell. If you want to create a world focused on family, focused on community, focused on friendship, focused on independence, focused on autonomy in work, then capitalism would not be it. In fact, what you have in advertising, I believe, is a vision of socialism. And that vision is used to sell these things called

commodities. If you wanted to create the world according to the values advertising focuses on, it would look very different. That's where a progressive movement should start. It should take the promises of advertising seriously and say, "Look, if you want this world, what do we have to do to ensure that these values are stressed instead of the values of individualism and greed and materialism?"

TWITCHELL: But advertising doesn't stress greed and materialism.

JHALLY: Well, it's about individual desires.

TWITCHELL: Maybe advertising excludes communal desires because they are not as high on most people's agendas as they are for those of us in our fifties. Maybe most people are not as interested in the things we say we are interested in such as family and community. Maybe they are more interested in individual happiness.

JHALLY: That's a fair question. We can't answer it yet, though, because advertising dominates so much that it leaves little room for alternative visions. My major problem with advertising is not the vision that it gives out. There are many positive things within that and that's what attracts people. Part of my problem with advertising is its monopolization of the cultural field. The questions you are asking can only be answered when you have a space in the culture where alternative values can be articulated. Then perhaps we can see what people's real values and preferences are because, at that point, they've had some choice. They have the alternative

values expressed in as powerful and creative a form as the values that advertisers express.

TWITCHELL: Why aren't there enough people like you in positions of cultural power? Why haven't these people, these silent but passionate people, been able to make their concerns known? Is it because the advertising culture is so powerful that it squeezes them into silence?

JHALLY: It's the way power operates. Some of us have more power and visibility than others. It depends on what degree your values link up with the people who control the cultural system.

TWITCHELL: Don't we control part of that system, the schools? Why have we done such a poor job?

JHALLY: I don't think we've done a poor job. The academy is the one place where there is independent thinking. That's why the Right and business have targeted it. The universities are the only place where these discussions take place. The Right complains about how the universities have been taken over by Leftists. To some extent, that's nonsense because most academics are fairly innocuous conservatives.

TWITCHELL: They are? Not at the schools I've been at.

JHALLY: There's a visible minority, but most of my colleagues are quite ordinary people. And the tendency is to focus on liberal academics and leave out the larger academic community: the scientists and business schools. . . . But when

there is a choice, students will choose those ideas. Our ideas are popular on campuses because it is one place where they can be expressed. It is one of the few places where there is competition between ideas.

TWITCHELL: Then why do these ideas lose their steam when students leave the campus?

JHALLY: When people leave school, they have to figure out what they're going to do. They're \$30,000 in debt. That's one of the great tricks of American capitalism; to get loyalty is to get people into debt early.

TWITCHELL: So this is the indenture system simply made more modern? You and I have completely different views of the same nest. My view is that these ideas don't really hold sway with our students, only our colleagues.

JHALLY: That's not my experience at all. When people are exposed to this, they have a couple of responses. The main one is, "Wow, this is overwhelming. I don't know what to do." So when people ask me what to do, I say that's not my job. Education provides the tools to think and understand the world. It is up to them to figure out what to do with that. Of course, once outside the university, you've got to have some community working in the same ways, otherwise you are indirectly isolated. This is not strictly evil capitalism; this is also the Left not building the kinds of institutions that provide people support. They don't exist, and you can either be an active or passive participant in building them.

TWITCHELL: So you are part of the solution or you're the problem.

JHALLY: Well, I don't think there is any such thing as being innocent in a world that is being constantly constructed.

TWITCHELL: Do you feel marginalized?

JHALLY: Sure. To some degree.

TWITCHELL: You have books that have been published.

JHALLY: Do I have as much power as Peter Jennings?

TWITCHELL: No. Should you? Do you have a pretty face? Can you read well?

JHALLY: Should that matter?

TWITCHELL: In television, absolutely.

JHALLY: Well, it matters in a system that's built on television ratings and keeping advertisers happy. But why must debate and media always be along those lines?

TWITCHELL: All these media are driven by the same machinery, the audience that can be delivered to advertisers. So it's skewed away from certain kinds of people who do not consume and it's pushed toward people who are massive consumers. It's pushed away from Sut and myself. We feel, Sut especially, feels marginalized.

JHALLY: Actually, in that sense, I feel targeted.

TWITCHELL: You're not targeted the way an eighteen-year-old is.

JHALLY: I have a lot of disposable income.

TWITCHELL: I'm not concerned about money. The point is you've already made your brand choices. You probably use the same toothpaste. You probably have a highly routinized consumptive life. You're not as interesting to an advertiser as an eighteen-year-old who has not made these choices. We see this when we look around. We see this great dreck of vulgarity that is being pumped out of Hollywood and the television networks and even in books. It's clear that this is not making me feel important, but I sometimes think, well, maybe that's the price you pay in a world where getting Nielsen ratings or getting on the best-seller list is crucial. Now, we're back to Peter Jennings. Peter Jennings' ideas--if those can be called ideas--are more alluring to more people than what Sut and I have to say. We may think our ideas are great, but the prime audience is saying no.

JHALLY: I totally disagree. It doesn't have anything to do with ideas. It's got to do with access. Americans gave away the broadcast system to advertisers in 1934, which meant that everything was going to be dependent on advertising revenues rather than public service.

TWITCHELL: What about PBS?

JHALLY: Public broadcasting is a great idea. I wish we could have it. PBS was always envisioned as entertainment for the elite rather than an alternative to commercial TV. It's possible to do public interest programming and be popular. Look at England. The BBC is driven by a different set of economic logics and produces different types of programs. That's why Masterpiece Theatre looks so different than the dreck that comes out from the networks. It's not because the Brits are more artistic. The BBC operates within a system of public service.

TWITCHELL: Is the BBC the most popular of the networks?

JHALLY: I don't have the latest figures, but I would imagine yes.

TWITCHELL: Is American dreck popular on English television?

JHALLY: Some. But if you're saying public service stuff is not popular, you're wrong.

TWITCHELL: What do you think should be on PBS?

JHALLY: There is a whole slew of independent filmmakers who don't get their work onto television or into Hollywood. The products of the Media Education Foundation, which are distributed mostly in classrooms . . . there is no shortage of stuff.

TWITCHELL: And there's an audience for this?

JHALLY: Sure. The question is whether you want to encourage diversity. Let's say it's not popular: So what! Why must popularity drive everything? Why shouldn't minority views be heard? Why is that so radical?

TWITCHELL: It's a great idea. But when I hear this argument, I always think: Why are the people saying it so powerless? Why do they always seem to be saying, "We should have this delivered to us?" Why don't they essentially force it through the system? I think it's because if you observe what they consume, you'll see that it's not what they say they want but is really the popular stuff that other people like.

JHALLY: Well, there are two issues here. One is diversity. Do you think diversity is a good thing to have in American media? The other issue is why hasn't this happened? That is an issue of power. Those are two separate questions. One is a question of value, the other is how you make it come about. There are more and more people who are starting to participate in collective movements and trying to bring about a different kind of culture. And I think education is the first step of that.

TWITCHELL: Well, I say more power to them. That is exactly what should be happening.

JHALLY: And that is what is happening. But do you recognize such a thing as power operating in the public sphere? Do you see that some people have more power than others and that not everyone can have their voice heard?

TWITCHELL: Here's where we differ. You see it as power coming from outside in. As if these corporate interests are over there doing things to us. I see it in a contrary way. I see a great deal of advertising and commercialism as being the articulated will of consumers rather than the air pumped out by commercial interests. Let's take an example where you seem to hold all the cards. Take De Beers' diamonds campaign. What is more ridiculous than the browbeating of men into buying utterly worthless hunks of stone to make Harry Oppenheimer and his descendants wealthy? Here's this company saying that if you want to be successful in courting women, it requires two months of your salary. Isn't this an example, from your point of view, of power from the outside compressing human freedom and desire? Yet as hideous as it is--and I think it the most hideous of advertising campaigns--there is something in it that speaks deeply to human beings in moments of high anxiety--namely, how to stabilize a frantic period of time. You stabilize it by buying something that all logic tells you is ridiculous and stupid, at a time in your life when you are the least able to afford it, when it is the most wasteful expenditure, and the cruelest exploitation in terms of how these stones are mined. And they're completely worthless. I mean, at least Nike makes good shoes! You would say, "Boy, I rest my case," but I say, "Is there any other explanation?" The explanation, I think, is the need to make ceremony, to fetishize moments of great anxiety. You can actually see them colonizing these moments later in life; now they're saying the ten-year anniversary or the twenty-year anniversary demands a whole new panoply of these otherwise worthless stones.

JHALLY: Sure, I agree with all of that. Advertising caters to deep human needs. People's relationship with objects is what defines us as human beings. The diamond example illustrates the power of advertising, but it's ultimately about how many goods are sold, which I don't think is a good way of measuring. Advertising can be powerful even if it never sells a product. The De Beers campaign means something to people who may never buy a diamond because it gives a particular vision of what love and courtship are about. I use this example in my class and people become outraged. In fact I've had students say "God, that's it, I'm never going to buy a diamond. They've tricked me into thinking that I've gotta have this." The De Beers example points to a number of things. One is how advertising works, by reaching deep-seated human needs. I don't call this manipulation. Capitalism works because in one sense it talks about real needs that drive people.

TWITCHELL: It's doing the work of religion.

JHALLY: Partly, yes. But it takes real needs and desires and says they are only satisfied by purchasing products. So what's real about advertising is its appeals. What's false about advertising is the answers it provides to those appeals.

TWITCHELL: But why not through objects?

JHALLY: We can argue about this in terms of moralistic standards or whatever, but I prefer an empirical question: "Do people become happier when they have more things?" There's quite a bit of literature on this. Robert Lane and Fred Hersch have talked about it. And Tibor Scitovsky, in his wonderful

book *The Joyless Economy*. There's a wonderful article by Richard Easterlin, who examined all the cross-cultural data on subjectivity and happiness and found that there is no correlation cross-nationally and historically between things and happiness. More things do not bring you more happiness. Although things are connected to happiness, it is always in a relative state. It is always in terms of what other people also have at that time. And so happiness in that sense is a zero-sum game. I think you can make a fine argument for a system of production that says, "We are going to make the most number of people the most happy, and we will do this more and more over time." But capitalism is not that system. Advertising people don't want to be selling this stupid stuff, they want to be making films and writing novels. If you really wanted to make more people happy (which I think should be the goal of a political movement because that notion of subjectivity is incredibly important), then what is it that actually makes people happy? What institutions will cater to those things? Secondly, if it's having this incredible effect on the environment, then we need alternative ways of thinking about it.

TWITCHELL: I'm with you. We agree. But I'm going to be Johnny One-Note and ask, "What are those things?" I'm very suspicious of those things and how powerful they really are. The great con game when we had very few things was the promised pie in the sky. In other words, a life after death. Really, what's happened is that we've moved all those promises down here into this world. I don't know if this works or not. But who cares whether it works. We believe it works. We think

things make us happy. My personal view is probably .0001 percent of that is true.

JHALLY: I want to go back to your question, "What are those things?" Those things aren't what I say they are. The social scientific literature reveals that what people talk about is social things. They want good family life...

TWITCHELL: Yeah, I never listen to what people say. I always listen to what people do.

JHALLY: That's a strange line for a democrat to be taking. [laughs]

TWITCHELL: No, not at all.

JHALLY: In democracies, shouldn't you pay some attention to what people say they want?

TWITCHELL: Here's my idea for an independent film. I want to set a camera on the head of my colleagues. And then I want to see what they do when they're left alone, to study the difference between saying and doing. It seems to me that reaching into the wallet is a much more powerful articulation of desire and belief than delivering the lecture. In that area, I think the market essentially shows this. What is being consumed is what people really do think is entertaining them, satisfying them, making them happy. It may not be what you and I like, but it is the illusion perhaps that is so powerful. And this illusion seems to be making American culture incredibly attractive to others and making other cultures essentially

mimics of American popular culture. Whatever this stuff is in advertising, it's incredibly powerful. It's pushed all these other things aside. Literature, art, religion. It's eating everybody's lunch. Maybe that's because most people most of the time want that for lunch. Maybe it really is resolving the concerns that they have, as hard as that is for us to believe.

JHALLY: Or maybe it's that the environment within which people make decisions is so dominated by one very narrow segment of the population.

TWITCHELL: Exactly.

JHALLY: That's where the issue of power comes in.

TWITCHELL: Even in countries where these commercial interests were put not just on the back burner but on no burner at all, all it took was just a momentary crack in the wall--Berlin or wherever--to come tumbling down.

JHALLY: It's the major motivating force transforming the world.

TWITCHELL: Could it also be because partly it is resolving what most people consider to be their concerns?

JHALLY: I go back to Marx on this. He starts off *Capital* by saying that if you can understand the world of commodities then you can understand the entire system in which we live. The other thing I always use from Marx is, "People make their own history [or meaning] . . . but not in conditions of their own

choosing." If you only look at the "conditions not of their own choosing," then all you focus on is power and manipulation. If you only look at "people make their own meanings," then all you see is individual freedom and choice. If you only look at one or the other, you get a distorted view. Advertising is the conditions not of your own choosing because it has dominated everything. If you give me a monopoly I can sell you anything. That's what De Beers did.

TWITCHELL: And, of course, communist countries essentially had a monopoly on media and on the production of objects and what happened to them? Why weren't they strong enough, powerful enough to make the dream of Marx come to reality?

JHALLY: Well, they weren't Marxist countries. The Soviet Union never dealt with people's individual needs. The Soviet Union fell apart because no one believed it. It fell apart partly because they could see these images coming out of the West, the most glamorous images of an alternative. When your reality is hunger and despair, no wonder this advertising model should be so powerful.

TWITCHELL: You seem to see advertising as a trick. I see the trickery not as them pulling a trick on us, but us actively collaborating in this process. Like the audience observing the magician, we know the lady is not being sawed in half. We can't quite understand how it works, but we suspend disbelief and give ourselves over to it. Even though we know that the claims of Alka-Seltzer are not true, we give ourselves over to it.

JHALLY: I agree. Advertising is an active process of creating meaning in which people and advertisers interact. But that is not devoid of power. Again, people make their own messages and meanings, but not in conditions of their own choosing. Jim always wants to stress the first part.

TWITCHELL: Yes I do.

JHALLY: I stress both. I don't stress the second part, but I don't forget the second part. If you don't have the second part, then you don't have the context within which things are taking place. You have abstract analysis, literary analysis. That's why I asked you if you view your work as literary analysis, because that would explain our different takes.

TWITCHELL: Yes, and I think the context that Sut refers to is so close to the water in which all us fish are swimming that we're begging the question if we think we can ever come to any understanding of it.

JHALLY: Oh, but we have to try, otherwise what are we here for? One more thing. It's a little bit annoying to me because you used your colleagues as evidence, but I agree, I think most academics don't think about knowledge the way that you and I do, actually. I think most people view this as a relatively simple, easy job that allows you to teach six hours a week and once you've got tenure you don't have to do very much.

STAY FREE: Jim, where does morality figure into advertising?

TWITCHELL: It doesn't. Advertising has one moral: buy stuff. Not very sophisticated. There are certain areas where I think we should pull the cord and say, "No advertising." I'm vehemently against Channel One. I despise billboards. They are in my opinion immoral. I am distraught that the State not only has gone into the lottery business but advertising. Other than that, I think that the application of moral concerns to advertising is feckless.

JHALLY: I think there is a morality in advertising. It may not be totally systematic, everyone may not adhere to the same thing, but there is a sort of story about what is good and bad, and what values should be stressed. That is a moral system. And I think you can evaluate that as you can evaluate any moral system. I think whether advertising tells the truth or not is actually the last thing you should evaluate it for.

TWITCHELL: It does not tell the truth.

JHALLY: Advertising doesn't even make any claims. That's one of the great tricks of the ad industry in terms of how it's regulated. You can only take legislative action against an ad if you can prove it is deceptive. But you can't evaluate most ads on that basis because there is nothing to evaluate.

TWITCHELL: I think when most people consume advertising, they know that they have to filter it because it's not going to be telling them the truth. But it's not the truth that they're after. They're after these patterns that have to do with belonging, with ordering, with making sense. So put the Truth Meter on Nike and you'll say "My God, who would pay an

extra 50 percent for something that is fungible with another product?" Put the Truth Meter on De Beers and you'd see that, "My God, what are we doing?" It's not put on these things because clearly they're addressing concerns that are not susceptible to normal reasoning. Ask somebody who has just bought a Lexus SUV, "Was that a sensible purchase?" And they'll almost always tell you it was a ridiculous purchase. Ask them why they bought it and they'll say, "I dunno... I just like the idea that I have this." Why would somebody have a Polo pony on their shirt when they know that they're just paying an exorbitant amount for the pony? Why would they do that unless somehow the pony was a badge or some kind of a token through which they magically thought they could understand and fit into the world? I am as susceptible as anyone. Sut teaches at the University of Massachusetts. Down the road is Amherst College, which charges triple what U. Mass charges. I, and my colleagues, go into voluntary indenture sending our kids to schools like Amherst rather than the University of Massachusetts. Why do I, who is inside this system and I know that U. Mass is not four times worse than Amherst, why do I go and borrow money to send my kids to this school? I do it because in the system that I move, that is one of the Polo ponies. It doesn't go on my shirt, actually, it's a decal that goes on the back of my Volvo. It violates every sensible bit of behavior. But in so doing it gives me what I want, which is this other sense of, "I'm doing well, I'm raising my child properly, I'm with the community that I feel values what I do." We are willing and conscious participators in a process that is hyper-irrational.

STAY FREE: Is advertising art?

TWITCHELL: Art is whatever I say it is, and I mean that quite literally. There is a group of people whose job is to make claims about certain things and in making those claims essentially apply the label "art." We are to high culture what advertisers, in some ways, are to mass-produced objects. Art really is what the people who teach literature, teach art, who run galleries, who edit magazines, say it is. It is not immutable, it is not timeless, it is not free of space. It's a community of critics who, in order to trade, teach, and communicate, say certain works need special treatment and that they're art. Is advertising art? No. Could it become art? Absolutely. The next generation may very well look at Birnbaum's Volkswagen ads and say, "Oh, that's art!" But right now, advertising is in the position of photography back in the 1930s where it was treated as a kind of whimsical, not very serious study. You can see it happening in movies. Movies which were thought to be entertainment, now thanks to the Academy, are considered works of enduring art.

JHALLY: There is a famous article by Theodore Levitt that essentially equates advertising with art. It's a defense of advertising that says, "People have always interpreted the world. What's the problem?" It suggests that as long as advertising doesn't lie, it should be evaluated by the same criteria that we've always evaluated art. I think that's a sort of self-serving argument.

TWITCHELL: But you wouldn't think that advertising currently is thought of that way, would you?

JHALLY: It depends what you mean by "art." Art in elite standards, no. But advertising has always been popular art. Even early on, people stuck ads on their walls. And in one sense that's a good indication of what people regard as art.

TWITCHELL: Except it's the wrong people. If you were to take your camera around to your colleagues' cubicles, what you'd see there would be more intriguing. I think if you were to take a camera around to my colleagues' offices you would find a lot of advertising.

[At this point, I asked them to comment on a fan letter to Nike, which was printed in Stay Free! #14; the letter writer, like many Nike devotees, has a Nike tattoo; she thanks Nike for helping turn her life around and offers an idea for a commercial.]

TWITCHELL: "Listen, Carrie, I've been terribly depressed in my life, I've been an alcoholic, free-based cocaine for most of my childhood, and then I found Jesus . . . and, look, I have a cross tattooed on my forearm."

Of course, I'm distressed over someone who attributes redemption to a sneaker company. I've been conditioned not to be distressed at a born-again Christian . . .

JHALLY: I'm more distressed by the born-again Christian (laughs). . . Your analogy is right on. I'd like to ask her exactly what about Nike made a great difference in her life. Part of it I can understand because the culture tells us that redemption comes through objects and she just happened to choose the one

that, for the moment, is everywhere. Her reaction is not totally off the wall, although it is extreme.

TWITCHELL: What separates her and the Yuppie with his Polo pony?

JHALLY: Not much. There's a wonderful new book out called the Overspent American by Juliet Schor . . .

TWITCHELL: [laughing] Don't tell me you liked that!

JHALLY: I thought it was great. It talked about how people go into debt for these things without the satisfaction that is supposed to go along with it. Goods have always been used to demarcate groups. A lot of defenses of advertising come from that notion, "Oh, people have always used products in this way, products have always had symbolic dimensions, what's wrong with advertising as long as we don't lie," etc. Part of being human is connecting through objects. That in itself is not what's interesting. What's interesting is the context within which these things appear. That's what analysis is for . . . Advertising says you are what you buy. Religions offer other conceptions of identity . . .

TWITCHELL: Where do you see power existing in a religious world? If power in the consumer world is with the producer or corporation . . .

JHALLY: In the religious world, power comes from the church.

TWITCHELL: I see the power more from the congregation than behind the pulpit. And the analogy with advertising is a valid one: Consumers travel through ads looking for meaning and purpose; so, too, the congregation forces the pastor to behave in certain ways. You say the power is with the Vatican or Madison Avenue, whereas the power really is in the supermarket aisle or church pew.

JHALLY: I think power is in both places. You can't look at one or the other.

[I asked Sut to state briefly, in closing, what he thinks can and should be done about advertising's monopoly of the culture.]

JHALLY: Cultural change takes time. The Left needs to see culture as a place where we have to battle. And we have to build new institutions that will be able to battle in that field. I'm trying to do it through Media Education Foundation as one start. Of course, there's a risk in engaging in advertising because the language may take you over. But there's no other choice right now, that is the language of the modern world and we've got to use it.